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Sections

[Focus](#)
[Columns and Reviews](#)
[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

Archives

[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

About Us

[About Us](#)

Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Fall 2005 \(Volume 3 Issue 1\) - Whom We Serve](#)

Faculty Consultations: An Extra Dimension to the University of Wyoming Writing Center

[Fall 2005 / Focus](#)

by Margaret Garner

The writing center at the University of Wyoming welcomes faculty as clients.

People are often surprised to learn that the [University of Wyoming Writing Center](#) provides services for faculty as well as for students and staff. We help faculty members with their writing, provide assistance with writing assignments, and consult with them regarding other aspects of writing instruction, such as the creation of rubrics. Do we not have enough to do when consulting with students? Why reach out to faculty?

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The simple answer is that we feel our writing center work is accomplished in collaboration with both faculty and students. It is a center for everyone to talk about writing. The more complex answer is that many benefits are realized by working with faculty as well as students.

One direct benefit is that we remove the stigma that the Writing Center is a place for poor writers, a place primarily for remediation. When we give classroom introduction talks, we can honestly say that we work with writers at all levels on all kinds of writing. We mention that we work with faculty as well as graduate and undergraduate students, and that the staff members make appointments with one another. When freshmen arrive at our door, they should not feel they are there because they are problem writers. We want people on our campus to know that everyone can benefit from talking about writing in our writing center, and working with faculty helps get across that idea.

Obviously, it also helps if faculty members have a good impression of the Writing Center, and working with them is an effective way to create that impression. They can see first-hand how we operate and understand what we do and what we do not do and are, thus, more likely to recommend the center to their students.

Helping faculty with writing assignments and rubrics has several benefits as well. We help improve writing instruction across the campus. Teachers in disciplines other than English, often feeling uncomfortable about teaching writing, find that talking over their writing assignments and receiving suggestions can help boost their confidence levels as well as improve the assignments themselves.

Perhaps there is also a selfish motivation on our part. Few writing center situations are more difficult than the one in which the consultant does not understand the assignment any better than the student. The student asks:

"What does the teacher mean when she says, 'Define an abstract concept using analogy and examples. Be sure to use specifics and not abstractions?'" The consultant looks at the assignment and gulps. What does the teacher mean? How will the consultant be supportive of the teacher's assignment if she does not understand it? Will the consultant be giving incorrect suggestions? Clear, well-written assignments benefit everyone, so the more we can help with them, the happier we are.

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As director of the Writing Center, I also offer faculty workshops on rubric creation and the integration of writing in courses. What I think is the most beneficial in these workshops is the conversation that occurs among faculty members. I am there only as a guide. The faculty members discuss the problems and questions they have and give each other suggestions. I give them models and suggestions as well and usually follow up the workshop with individual consultations.

The Writing Center staff and I also give workshops to classes across campus. Sometimes we conduct these in the Writing Center and sometimes in the students' classroom. When we plan these workshops (at the teacher's request), we make clear that the workshop is a collaborative effort with the teacher. That is, we request that the teacher be involved in the planning and participate in the workshop. Our desires are not always realized, but most teachers are cooperative. By including the teachers in the preparation and presentation of the workshop, we hope to encourage them to do their own writing workshops and get a better understanding of what the Writing Center does. Of course, these workshops also encourage students to visit our center.

While I am committed to working with faculty in the Writing Center, I realize that there can arise two major difficulties. One is time. I would never want faculty appointments to displace student appointments, but the chance of that happening is slim. Working with faculty does not take up much time. When faculty members use our services for their writing, they are usually just seeking feedback from another listener. They are concerned about clear sentences, logical organization, and clarity of ideas. They are not concerned with grammar, mechanics, and format. Faculty members usually need only one or two appointments for an article. Only one appointment is needed for working on a writing assignment.

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The second difficulty relates to writing center staffing. The University of Wyoming Writing Center is fortunate to be staffed primarily with faculty so it has the personnel to work with graduate students and faculty. Writing centers that are staffed primarily with undergraduate students would have more difficulty working with faculty as clients. The problem is not that undergraduate consultants are poor listeners. Rather, the faculty members may not have confidence in the undergraduates' feedback. In addition, most undergraduate consultants tend not to have much experience with the expectations of professional-level writing. The University of Wyoming Writing Center usually has

three or four undergraduate consultants each semester, and I make sure they are not scheduled to work with faculty members.

I also realize that consulting with faculty does not remove all professorial misconceptions about the Writing Center, but it does help. Faculty members learn that we are not an editing service, we do not do the work for the students, and we support the faculty. They learn about our philosophy and realize that we will not put ourselves between students and teachers.

Moreover, our faculty consultations expand the mission of the University of Wyoming Writing Center. The traditional hallmark of writing centers is talking. To be successful, I think, writing centers need to keep up the talking—talking among consultants, talking among students, and talking among faculty members. Through this communication, we can truly have a collaborative endeavor.

Margaret Garner directs the **Writing Center at the University of Wyoming** and teaches in the Department of English. She has published articles on writing center work, health science writing, and dance. She is currently working on a nonfiction book.

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